

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE PRESENT POSITION OF THE RELIGIOUS
LIFE IN THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE
TO THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS TO THE
VISITOR

The Rt. Rev. Bro. Michael S.S.F.
Bishop of St. Germans

To analyse or describe in detail the present position of the Religious Life in the Church of England, would take much longer than this paper will permit. The most I can offer are some reflections based primarily on those Religious Orders with houses in England, though, over the years, I have seen something of the Communities in Australia, America, Africa, and elsewhere. We are still passing through what is possibly the most significant turning point in a history of less than 150 years. For some communities, it is a time of sustained crisis and, though we are not lacking in optimism as well as the convictions that come from our vocation, it is also true that many need the understanding support and care of their Visitors as never before.

Though my comments will be confined largely to the Religious Orders in England, what I have to say not only applies equally in other countries, but is, I think, for obvious reasons, inseparable from them. It is, perhaps, worth noting that the Religious Orders in Commonwealth, Third World, or developing countries, have their own particular difficulties which are often reflected in the life of the "Mother Houses" in whatever country they are situated.

THE VISITOR

That we should hold such a meeting as this, reflects a developing concern for the relationship of the Religious Orders to the Church as a whole.

In this, the position of the Visitor is inevitably significant. "A Directory of Principles and Practice", published by the Advisory Council for Religious Communities in England, a book which, it is emphasised, is not a code of law (and, strictly speaking, has only such authority as

has been given it by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York) contains the following passage concerning Visitors:

1. Visitor. Religious are subject to the ordinary jurisdiction of the Bishop of the Diocese in which they reside. Moreover, each Community has a Visitor, who must be in Episcopal Orders, and extraneous to the life and membership of the said Community. He is the guardian of the Constitution of the Community, and the guarantor to the Church at large of its sound administration, stability, and right to confidence, and he is also the normal court of appeal for the maintenance of its discipline. He has for these purposes visitatorial authority also over all the Branch Houses of the Community, unless such Houses, being situated outside the British Isles, have their own Visitor duly appointed in accordance with the Constitution of the Community.

(a) Terms of appointment. The Visitor should be chosen by the Community, and should be either (i) the Bishop of the Diocese in which the Mother House is situated or (ii) with the consent of the Diocesan, a Bishop of the Province, or (iii) with the consent of the Diocesan and the Metropolitan, some other Bishop. The term of office is to be laid down in the Statutes.

(b) Rights and duties. Apart from such functions as may be prescribed in the Statutes for the discharge of the above mentioned obligations, the Visitor has the inherent right to make visitations at his own discretion, not less than once every five years, in order that he may satisfy himself on all matters of which he is guardian and guarantor. He also has the right and duty of hearing appeals, whether addressed to him by the Chapter for adjudication, or privately submitted in the interest of justice by any professed member of the Community, or by any responsible person external to the Community. The Statutes should make it clear that every professed member of the Community has the right of unhindered appeal to the Visitor. As distinct from these inherent rights, every body of Statutes must contain provisions regulating the manner of the appointment of the Visitor, and specifying matters or occasions on which his intervention will be required.

(c) Outside these functions, whether inherent or statutory, the Office does not convey any right of intervention or initiative in the affairs of the Community.

Nevertheless, the particular role of the Visitor to any Community can vary considerably. It may be of some comfort to know that this is not just another Anglican peculiarity, and the apparent difficulties experienced by us from time to time reflect a similar situation in the Roman Catholic Church.

There was a time when the regulations which governed the Religious Life seemed fairly clear, and the disciplines of Rule, Constitution, Statutes, were a sufficient background for administration by a Superior, or advice and protection from a Visitor.

Yet, no matter how much we borrowed from or imitated one another or the Roman Church, the essentially Anglican attribute kept breaking through. Most Communities in the Church of England were founded as a result of personal vision and initiative, sometimes in the face of opposition and suspicion, and this occasionally included the Episcopate. It resulted in a diversity of practice which is astonishing when the comparatively small numbers concerned is taken into consideration. Some of that still remains. And, though in England the Advisory Council (and the Directory) has helped to co-ordinate, consolidate, and relate the Religious as a whole to the life of the Church, a certain amount of sturdy independence (and sometimes fear of its activities) remains, and the "advisory" capacity of the Council overshadowed by a suspicion of its authority.

This is reflected in the role of the Episcopate. In some cases, for instance, the Visitor is automatically the Diocesan of the house in which the Order was founded (a considerable inheritance where the Bishop of Oxford is concerned. He has fourteen Religious Houses in his Diocese,

and it is not to be supposed that he necessarily had any particular knowledge of the Religious Life prior to his appointment). Others choose their own Visitor. In many cases, the Community may well have a large number of branch houses scattered throughout the country, each with a different Diocesan who naturally recognises a responsibility towards them. The Sisters almost always have a Warden (a peculiarity of the Anglican Church) who, according to some Constitutions, also has considerable responsibility. There are also Chaplains.

Reverend Mothers have, as a consequence, several directions to which they may turn for advice, apart from the internal authority of their own Chapters and Councils. All of which can work well until, perhaps, the Mother or the Chapter decides to close a house. The Diocesan suddenly sees a valued witness disappearing. The Visitor may or may not have been consulted. (I say suddenly because communication is not invariably a strong point in the administration of Religious Orders!) Explanations might be, apparently, vague and possibly contradictory, etc. Probably only the Mother knows the internal stresses or personal factors that have governed the decision. I use this particular illustration because it is something which has happened frequently of late, and the precise role of the Visitor in all this is sometimes difficult to define.

THE VISITOR IN A TIME OF CHANGE

To say what lies behind this, it is necessary to go back a little.

The first Oxford Conference, in 1965, was of great importance from many points of view. For the first time, the Religious Communities from all over the world were able to see themselves as being all together a significant element

in our Church. It also obliged many Superiors, and others, to recognise that the Religious Life, in common with the rest of the Church, was being challenged to a radical re-thinking of much that we had taken for granted. By the time of the second Oxford Conference, in 1967, "Renewal" had become a persistent part of our vocabulary, and after York, in 1974, with the combined experience of many Communities that had undertaken radical adaptations in their lifestyle, we accepted that we must recognise "the signs of the times". It was agreed that we might wait for a considerable period of years before undertaking another conference. The next may be in 1983.

The conferences were of great value. A genuine solidarity among Religious was established which meant that no Community need be alone in facing the future. Through the Communities Consultative Council in particular, which was subsequently established in England, there was created something like a continuing annual conference for the exchange of ideas and mutual support and encouragement. This led to conferences on a local or regional level, the enlargement of "Encounter and Exchange" (a regular publication for Anglican Religious) as a means of communication, conferences for Novice Masters and others involved in the early formation of Religious, etc.

Some hard facts remained, however. Among other things, that there were fewer and fewer novices to train. And this was only one (though, some felt, almost the most significant) sign of the degree to which events, both external and internal, were challenging the life of the Religious Communities. In some instances, and this includes our most distinguished, apparently stable and numerically large orders, it meant

facing losses in two ways; for not only did the number of novices diminish to nothing, or almost nothing, but the crisis of confidence led to the departure of some of the most significant members of the Order. For instance, the Society of St Francis lost both the Novice Master and the Guardian of its Mother House in the same year. Not only did this mean that men whose stability and leadership had been taken for granted were no longer with us, but, as they both married, those who remained, and had been trained by them, were committed, almost without realising it, to a reconsideration of their own stability and celibacy. Of course, it is no new thing for Religious to leave their Orders, or for others to leave with them, as happened in this case, and in many other Communities as well; but the circumstances which produced this crisis of confidence were new, and the consequences are still with us.

The theological ferment of the past twenty years has had something to do with it, though not, I would suspect, nearly as much as might be expected. Vatican II, which led to vast changes among Religious in the Roman Catholic Church, has certainly exerted some influence on us, though, again, not as much as might have been expected when we consider the degree to which our Religious Orders are similar to theirs. More significantly, perhaps, the whole background of life, social, economic, and, I think, particularly spiritual, during the 60's and 70's seemed to call into question life in Community as it was then being lived - and still is.

If I have dwelt upon these two factors, the Religious who leave and the novices who don't come, or don't stay, it is not because I believe it to be the only, or the chief, difficulty which faces any official Visitor to a Religious

Order, but because it is the most obvious one, and often a contributory factor to the many other circumstances that affect our life at the present time. It calls for a sensitive and informed appreciation on the part of the Visitor where the lifestyle of the Religious Life is concerned, and the dynamics of any one particular Order. This can be, among all the other demands on a Bishop, sometimes considerably time-consuming.

COMMUNITIES THAT "DIE OUT"

Some of the immediate effects are obvious. A number of Communities have died out, and there are several, perhaps many, more that will cease to exist before the end of the century. It is easy to say that this is no bad thing, that we had too many, or that they die because they have completed the work which they were established to do, or that they refused to bring themselves up to date. It does demand considerable courage, faith, and spiritual strength, for the few who remain, as well as tactful care, love, and patience, and a readiness to protect their interests on behalf of our Visitors and all those who are concerned with them. Sometimes, for instance, the remaining few might move in with another Community, as has happened in several cases, but this is by no means invariably possible or successful. It is very difficult to leave a convent or monastery in which you have lived for forty or fifty years.

Diminishment of this kind can come with remarkable speed. One convent which I visited recently had fifteen sisters two years ago. Then six died in one year. The picture for the remaining nine (all elderly, and one currently in hospital) has changed radically. The convent is a large property, incorporating a pre-Reformation monastic house. The Mother said, "I am so afraid that our house will become a hotel

when we go." This is only one of many similar situations, made all the more difficult because the sanctity and serenity of their lives, and their spirit of prayer, means that, if anything, they are attracting more guests and visitors.

CHANGING PATTERNS OF COMMUNITY LIFE

For many other Communities, the subtle problem has been how to change, perhaps radically; accept diminished numerical strength; discover a new apostolate; and re-establish the life of the Order without losing the significant and unique attitude of the foundation. This has been particularly challenging for those active Communities engaged in education, medical, social, or evangelistic work, and have been obliged to give up well established schools, hospitals, or hostels, or to withdraw from a recognised apostolate of preaching, teaching, and spiritual direction. Striking examples are the East Grinstead Sisters, the Society of the Sacred Mission, or, more recently, the Society of St John the Evangelist. Perhaps it is evidence of their ability to adapt and renew and yet retain their identity that, even though much more is changing than their location, we still speak of "Kelham" and "Cowley".

The rethinking that lies behind this involves costly decision making on the part of the leadership, and sensitive understanding from those who advise and support them.

Some changes, and those which rouse the greatest comments as well as criticism (sometimes from those who understand least what is happening) are comparatively less important, even if the discussion about them seems endless, particularly true, perhaps, of the religious habit. It is surprising how great a threat it has been to those outside our religious orders when even the slightest change has been made.

Religious in secular clothes, which is commonplace in the Roman Catholic Church, is still seen by some in the Anglican Communion as some sort of compromise with "the World".

In fact, we have remained very far behind the Roman Church in this respect and, though I can hear someone saying, "and a good thing, too!", I fear that an antiquarian concern for the Religious Life is not enough. What we are more deeply concerned about is the Life itself, lived in Community, however expressed, and under Vows, declared in particular by a Rule and Constitution, and its life of prayer, governed by Superiors who are answerable on one hand to the Religious Congregation, and, on the other, to the ecclesiastical authorities. This has to adapt and renew itself in every generation if it is to remain a living part of the Body of Christ. In many instances, too little has been done too late, and often, because of a fear of change, of moving into the unknown, a desire to please (even please the Visitor), too many contradictory voices giving advice, and - possibly the most significant factor of all - acknowledging new and more enlightened patterns of leadership. The relationship of the Visitor to his Superior is obviously of paramount importance.

THE VISITOR AND THE RELIGIOUS SUPERIOR

The difficulties of the Religious Superior, at present, often spring from the apparent impossibility of balancing the old authoritarian attitude of benevolent autocracy with consensus decision making. A particular problem in a Religious Order, if the majority are aged monks or nuns for whom obedience has been defined over too many years with what Mother or Father or the Rule says, and can sometimes exercise their new found freedom against a background which either fears change or innovation, or will clutch at any straw to carry on.

There have been not a few breakdowns among Religious Superiors because, for example, elections take place against a strong feeling of "we know whom we don't want" rather than the more positive attitude which would look for the logical strong or younger leader.

The hard fact remains that it is the Superior who must help the Community to reconsider and change its life style without destroying its life, spiritually and materially. In Communities where the memory of the founder is still strong, or the brethren are reacting forcibly, either in favour of or against, the tradition established by prior Superiors, the present Superior is sometimes inclined to feel that "you can't win"!

Often, only the Superior recognises the degree to which the Community is "on the brink" of decline, even though apparently still flourishing. The Reverend Mother of one community of women told me that she now had forty Sisters who were infirm. There was once a time, many years ago, when the same Sisters were all together in the novitiate! Her novitiate is now very small compared with those days, and all the closing of schools and missions cannot keep up with the demands made on the daily life of the houses that remain. It is not easy, under such conditions, to propose innovative changes.

Too frequently it is hoped that, by altering the Rule, or tinkering a little with the timetable, a magic formula will be found to attract new members, when what is needed is a more radical evaluation of the whole apostolate of the Community.

The Religious Superiors, who are the people with whom the Visitor is working most closely, are therefore exposed to demands for which, sometimes, they have comparatively little preparation; of which the Community has little knowledge (and, indeed, in the past, has been discouraged from having), and of which they have little awareness before being landed with the job. Problems of changing liturgy and prayer can, perhaps, be familiar ground; the clamant demands of the insecure, lonely, aged, or sick, can be accepted as part of the daily round; but re-arranging the whole structure of a Community; leaving a monastery, perhaps; all the business, legal, financial, material, etc, involved in such a radical re-arrangement of life, makes its obvious demands. The loneliness and the sheer weariness involved in carrying your Community with you, explaining, reassuring, comforting, and sometimes bullying, while retaining a proper sense of hope; all this, and much more, is a significant part of leadership in the Religious Life at the present time, and demands endless tact, sympathy, understanding, and support.

I happened to be present some years ago when a new Superior was elected in a Religious Order for men. An elderly monk sitting by me said, "They think they've given him a crown, - but they are giving him a cross." He did his best, and he was young and keen, but the circumstances defeated him, and he was finally exclaustrated. Another Community had three Mothers in as many years.

A brighter side of the picture would suggest that we have a new generation of Superiors emerging. Many of them much younger than has been the case in the past. Conscious of the past great figures only in their determination not to be obliged to imitate them. Finding their feet in the changed conditions; apparently low-key, less dominant, more resilient, hard-working; less dependent on charismatic over-play or personality; but remarkably persistent in their honest

recognition of themselves; not given to exaggerated hopes or expectations; honestly facing facts, and finding new ground on which to build for the future. Above all, discovering ways in which the fundamental structure of the Religious Life can be protected, and also new ways of sharing leadership and decision-making with the community, either at the level of central administration or the local branch house.

THE RELIGIOUS

The strains of such situations tell not only on the Superior, but on the Sisters and Brothers, too. It sometimes seems, to those outside, extraordinary that Religious should be the victims of emotional disorder. It is expected that spiritually integrated lives might be free of what is an all-too-familiar part of secular life. Frustration and fear, as well as inability to adapt; the anxiety of the Community in its uncertainties; the fear of failure, as well as the knowledge we now have of human motivation, have all produced a deeper understanding of the Religious Vocation as such. For instance, those who come to join Religious Orders today assume an understanding of personality and motivation which is part of the accepted background of contemporary society. Some orders, recognising this, ask for psychological tests before admitting new members. This can create severe contrasts and conflicts in any small group engaged in an active apostolate, the majority of whom probably belong to those earlier generations whose formation was approached in a vastly different way. Monks and contemplative nuns, with their different time scale and pressures, are probably able to accept contrasts of this kind with greater security. It is certainly significant that it is largely with them that the most positive signs of security and growth are to be found at present. The temptation to keep it going at all costs has

often led, in spite of our knowledge, to unsuitable men and women being accepted into orders, which run the risk of becoming therapeutic communities, without the therapy.

It is at this point that the rethinking of Religious Vocation as such is of considerable significance, together with all that follows from it - life in Community, the Religious Vows, the charism of the Religious Life and its Spirituality, and our specific role in the Body of Christ. Many of the old definitions are still both adequate and accurate, but, too often, we use the terminology of the past, and associate it with expectations which are unrelated to our present realities.

THE FUTURE

In spite of all this, certain patterns are emerging which represent growing signs of hope for the future. Men and women are beginning to look towards the Religious Orders, against a background of a more clearly defined spiritual need. The charismatic movement, in the wider sense of the word, has, I think, been in part responsible, though judging by those I meet, the true reasons are deeper and more complex. The break-up of family life; single-parent families; the total social climate and general disillusionment with things as they are; the real need for community, and the acceptance of communal living as a natural expression of life; the possibility of being spiritually articulate without being emotionally abnormal; a more understanding attitude to sexuality, human relationships and authority; and, above all, a conscious, though not easily defined sense of the priority of God and His action in our lives, which logically leads to a life of dedication and prayer.

All this represents a new opportunity for the Religious Orders.

As they grow few in number, the need to adapt themselves to see their vocations as a call from God to meet the next generation of Religious is certainly both challenging and humbling.

Certain trends have shown themselves. Some are obvious. The very large monastic buildings, expensive to run, to heat, to maintain, are neither appropriate nor possible. It looks like a loss when we leave them. In fact, it is a sign not only of reality, but release, and can be the first outward sign of the new, hidden life, that is being discovered. Though there will probably always be a need for some large centres, the majority will continue to experiment with small houses, the emphasis being on the people and not the property. Flexible life styles can emerge, supported by greater emphasis on various patterns of contemplative prayer. Works, for the active Communities, that are related to the local situation, rather than depending on specialised apostolates. Religious who are seen to "pay their way" though still remaining true to the vows of poverty; who live more openly in love, yet never deny the authority of their vows of chastity; and accept an obedience that is reflected in a respect for authority and mutual understanding at every level.

There is, unquestionably, a genuine revival in the Religious Life taking place. The uncertainties of the world in which young men and women live now has focused the inner world of spiritual commitment in a new way, which permits the possibility of the recognition of vocation. The past twenty years has created patterns of Religious Life which present the possibility of realising those vocations in a manner that is consistent, free from compromise, and uncluttered with any sort of romantic illusion. It will

always be a vocation that appears to defy what the world at large defines as the norm. At the same time, the disorientation of our spiritual and social structures are such that life in Community is increasingly recognised as a valid expression of a way of salvation given by God to some, in order to be a sign to the many. It will never be an easy life for anyone, and the changes have not made it easier, but they have made it possible. The revival of Franciscanism in the past fifty years is one sign of this. So also, in contrast, is the steady growth of some Contemplative Orders for women.

Even more significant, from the point of view of the Visitors, is the recognition that the Religious Orders are an on-going part of the Anglican Communion as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Religious are no spiritual extra to the life of the Catholic Church. They constitute a sign of the true Church, and we might note that the Eastern Church validates this view by continuing to call its Episcopate from the ranks of the monks.

It is also a prophetic sign that, though we share a place at the centre of the life of the Church, we live also on the fringe, standing not in the centre of the city, but at the edge, and calling.

Monasticism, as an eschatological sign of the Kingdom of God, is better placed, in the age of "Apocalypse Now", than it has ever been, to be heard by a disillusioned and disenchanted generation.

We need to be free to live out our life in the Church towards God and Man, and the development of the Religious Orders in the Anglican Communion has emphasised an independence which accepts far fewer juridical bounds than is to be found in the Roman Catholic Church.

We should probably be thankful for that. Yet it is also important that we should be seen and heard speaking as one. This meeting might well mark a significant move in that direction.

It is noticable how readily, almost eagerly, the widest range of people, Christians or enquirers, recognise and value the monastic and contemplative houses today, and, almost with an audible sigh of relief, acknowledge the evidence of committed lives, community living, and the transcended power of prayer in the presence of God. Young people, in particular, are ready to accept Religious for what they are, free from the past associations which identified them, however wrongly, as part of the slightly eccentric Catholic fringe of Anglicanism. They are not yet knocking on the door in any numbers, but they are coming. It may be significant that, in England since the last war, only one new Religious Order for men has established itself and retained a bold determination to continue experimenting, often in the face of a good deal of criticism, in meeting that contemporary challenge. Only one door! But I believe that, with your encouragement and help, we can begin to offer and open many more.

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